SPORTS

Starling starting over with Elkins

Editor's note: The following story did not run in its entirety in the Jan. 31 Fort Bend County ThisWeek section.

By TODD HVEEM
ThisWeek Correspondent

THE Elkins Knights once again could be the kings of Class 5A baseball after one of Spring's most heralded pitchers transferred to the Fort Bend Independent School District at the end of the first semester.

Wardell Starling Jr., who pitched the Northwest 45 All-Stars into the 1995 Little League World Series, moved into the Elkins High School district with his family just over a month ago.

Starling, who is only a junior, has been a starter for Ken Humphreys' Lions each of the past two years. He was a first-team All-District 16-5A pitcher as a sophomore, and last fall earned All-District 15-5A football honors as a starting wide receiver on Spring's 7-3 football team.

"The family does not want to live here," Humphreys said when asked about Starling transferring to Elkins, which enters the season ranked No. 3 in the state. "What are we supposed to do? He is a great kid and a great athlete. We wish him nothing but the best."

Humphreys said several District 20-5A coaches have talked about challenging the transfer.

"We will see what happens," he said. "We have signed the papers and sent them over to District 20-5A. That is for them to decide who is eligible or not. Our kids just need to get on with their season."

All protests seemed to be in the past, however. An official in the office of Fort Bend ISD athletics director Keith Kilgore confirmed that Starling's transfer papers had been received and processed, clearing the way for Starling to become a Knight.

Elkins has qualified for the Class 5A state tournament three times in the past seven years, winning the state title in 1995 and losing to Klein in the state finals in 1998. The Knights also advanced to the state tourney in 2000, losing to Corpus Christi Moody in the state semifinals.

Elkins head coach Rick Carpenter was glad the Starling family is heading to Sugar Land.

"It makes me feel pretty good," said Carpenter, who is now in his ninth year as the Knights' head coach. "It was quite a surprise and quite a thrill. I heard a rumor that the family had friends over here and was considering it.

"I have never seen the kid play but I have certainly heard a ton about him. Since he has been here, I have had a ton of dealings with him in the hall and out there working on the field. He is a very, very nice kid."

Starling will join junior lefthander James Loney to form perhaps the best 1-2 starting rotation in the state of Texas.

"We have had a couple move-ins over the years," Carpenter said. "We have had a couple kids move in as seniors who ended up being big-timers for our team. As a matter of fact, our most valuable player one time was a move-in.

"But I don't know if we have ever had one of this caliber," he added. "In fact, I don't know if we have ever had athletes celebrated as much as these two names. When I heard Wardell's family was moving to Sugar Land, I had absolutely heard the name. And everybody knows the name James Loney."

Carpenter said he expects there to be a lot of ill will in Spring and around District 20-5A.

"I am sure it is a sore subject in several places," he said, "but it is a free country. People are free to move where they want to. We just happened to be the recipient. Lord knows we have been on the other end of it. We had five players move out last year."

In 1995, Carpenter said the Knights had a pitching staff featuring Kip Wells, who now is with the Chicago White Sox; Sean Thompson, who was the ace at TCU for three years; and Ivan Heredia, who went to Lee College.

"That was really a quality pitching staff," Carpenter said. "It will be hard to beat. But we have a kid, Kelly Shearer, who also was 4-1 as a freshman. He will be in the top three (with Loney and Starling). It could be a pretty formidable trio, too."

Starling, who said he didn't find out he was moving until right after Christmas, has mixed emotions about the transfer.

"I kind of miss back home, but I am kind of glad I am in a new environment," he added. "I knew I would miss back home, but then again, we wanted a change. My parents wanted a new house. That was about it."

Starling said he will cherish his years at Spring.

"We were in the playoffs every year," he said. "I got to play with Josh Beckett (now with the Florida Marlins). That was a great experience. We all grew up playing together."

Starling, who said he is not sure if he is going to play football at Elkins, had a "great relationship" with Humphreys.

"Coach Humphreys talked to me about all this before we actually moved," he said. "He liked me playing for him and I liked playing for him."

Starling said his former Spring teammates were understandably upset.

"They were kind of angry, but I expected that," he said. "They were looking forward to having a great season, but I think they still can have a great season even though I am not there. They have all been playing together for a long time."

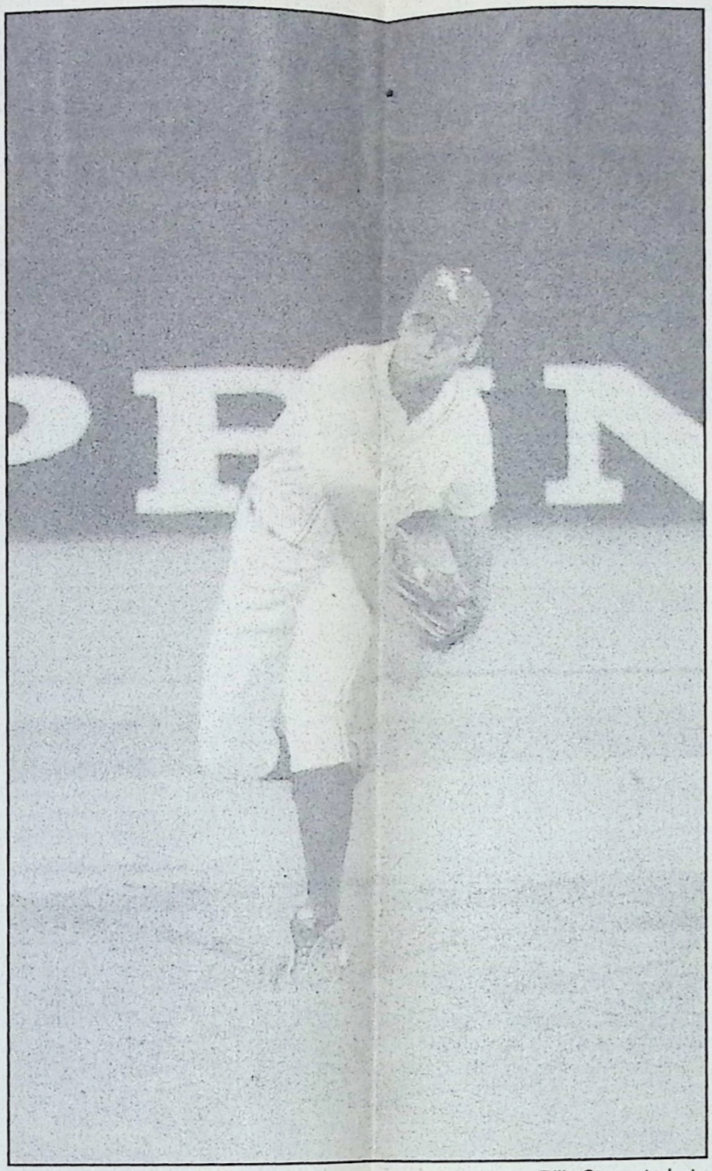
Starling said his mother still is employed at a business located off FM 1960 in Spring, while his father travels around the Houston area with his insurance business.

The star junior said he would love for Spring and Elkins to meet in the state tournament.

"That would be the ultimate," he added. "I wish them all the best. I am sure I will be going back to see them some over the summer."

Humphreys still feels the Lions are going to be competitive in District 15-5A.

"I feel pretty solid about our team," he said. "We are going to have a tough non-district schedule and a tough district, but that is the way we like it. The kids feel like we are going to show people that we might have lost a great player and all, but we are going to get after it and prove we are going to be as good as all the other Spring teams in the past."



Billy Stewart photo

Wardell Starling Jr., who pitched for Spring last year and had a storied career in the area after leading the 1995 Northwest 45 All-Stars to the Little League World Series, has transferred to Elkins.